



## The Church's Future Is on the Line

"I've worked hard to be colorblind." "No, I *want* you to see my color!" "It's no longer just a black and white issue... has anyone noticed that?" "To tell you the truth, I was afraid to take this class because I knew it would press buttons I didn't want pressed!"

These are some of the comments from students in my Race and Ethnic Relations class, comments not confined to a Christian university but also echoed in the homes of many people of God. They remind us that racial harmony is still a long way off and that while progress has been made toward dismantling the racial divide, much more work remains.

I myself never struggled so much with the race question as I have as a church-planting pastor in Florida's Broward County, an even more ethnically diverse county than Miami-Dade. The award-winning 2005 film *Crash* revealed that even those who think they have no prejudice will—when pushed against the wall or when faced with danger—discover deep-seeded bigotry coming to the surface. I certainly did. I realized that while I allowed my theology to help me avoid discriminating against individuals, I was guilty of discriminating institutionally. That meant that I had a problem with Latinos worshipping at an all-white church. I had a problem with the inherent ethnic hierarchy that existed and wanted to see people that looked like me in positions of authority. While I recognized that I was somewhat culturally assimilated, I kept structural assimilation to a minimum. All this, however, was unconscious...and therein lies the problem.

The problem with us evangelicals is that most of us don't dare tackle this issue from the pulpit or in our Sunday Schools. Not that any one church, pastor, or leader will come up with "the" answer to this race issue, but it's in recognizing that there may be more "exclusion" in us than "embrace" (to borrow from Miroslav Volf's book title) that we start to know ourselves and are able to bring our exclusion to the Cross and start developing relationships under God's reign and not under the rules of this world. The truth is that we've heard the troubling commentary on racism and Katrina, but Sunday mornings—"the most segregated hour of the week"—also reflect an all-too-real racial divide.

But why do we have to choose? Can't I be bicultural in this multicultural society? For example, I consider myself a Blatina. While I am a born-and-bred New York Rican, I grew up in the projects where most of my neighbors and school friends were black. I am just as comfortable with Soul and chopped barbecue as I am with Salsa and *pernil*. At college I joined a black sorority, but when I got involved in ministry years later, I picked up on the tacit—albeit unofficial—policy that racial lines should not be crossed in the church.

Thankfully some people are trying to change that. Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook ([www.drsojajay.com](http://www.drsojajay.com)) is one of them. As a powerful woman of God, she invited this Blatina to share at her conference for a second time, the only Latina on the speaker lineup for her Women in Ministry International Conference 2 held in California last October. The point is that



she is intentional about crossing the line. As Christians we, too, need to be intentional about healing the racial divide. If we're worried about breaking with tradition, we need look no further than the early church to find the precedent we require—a veritable *sancocho* stew of different races, from different nations, all working together. The only thing that held that early church together was the Spirit of God and the unity of Christ.

Scripture provides plenty of encouragement for unity over racial and national lines. In Acts 2—a reversal of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 where the nations are scattered—Christ poured out his spirit to reunify the languages and give the gospel to all nations. In Revelation 7:9, the great crowd that worships God is from "every nation, tribe, people, and language of the earth."

Racial reconciliation is a ministry too often viewed by evangelicals as optional. I believe women can and should be in the forefront of publicly dialoging about this issue today, because many have been in the past. To name just two: in 1855, the Young Women's Christian Association was formed in London by Emma Robarts and Mrs. Arthur Kinnaird and has been a pioneer in race relations ever since; since 1961, Church Women United ([churchwomen.org](http://churchwomen.org)) has been concerned with the issue of race relations.

How can the church be an example to the world when it is riddled with racism and hatred? What will it be—racial harmony or racial divide? The Bible I read does not let us off the hook; it's not optional. So what are you prepared to do? The church's future is on the line. ■

*Elizabeth D. Rios is an Ed.D. candidate in organizational leadership at Nova Southeastern University, co-pastor with her husband of Wounded Healer Fellowship, and Adjunct Professor/Director of Communications & Community Relations at Trinity International University's South Florida Regional Center. You can contact her at [latinaliz@aol.com](mailto:latinaliz@aol.com).*